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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SNAPSHOT OF LIFE IN SERAHS

REF: ASHGABAT 1560

11. (SBU) Poloff visited the town of Serahs in late November to meet with local officials and candidates for the upcoming Mejlis (legislative) elections (reftel). Serahs, located on what was formerly the Great Silk Road between the ancient cities of Nishapur and Merv, sits on the Iranian border. The rest of the village now lies across the border in Iran, the result of a demarcation carried out in the 1930s. As Serahs has no hotel accommodations, Poloff made arrangements to stay in a private home that offers rooms to paying guests. The house was large and situated on one floor. Virtually none of the rooms had furniture, but were covered in Turkmen carpets, as Turkmen traditionally eat, entertain guests and sleep on the ground. A large television in one of the entry-way rooms was tuned to a Russian music station most of the time.

12. (SBU) The home, like the rest of Serahs, had no indoor plumbing, and was owned by a family with six daughters ranging in age from ten to 22. The family explained the names given to the fifth and sixth daughters: When the fifth was born, they named her Bessir (meaning: "enough"), hoping that the next baby would be a boy. When the sixth baby was a girl, they named her simply "Alti," the Turkmen word for "sixth."

13. (SBU) The father of the family resides in Turkmenbashi, on the Caspian Sea, where he is employed as a surveyor by a private company. He rarely travels back to Serahs, although his wife, a school teacher, travels to Turkmenbashi on occasion for short visits during school vacations. Poloff had occasion to sit and converse at length with the three older daughters: The eldest is employed as a school teacher, the second (age 20) with a small company in Serahs, and the third, named Bahar, graduated from high school last spring. She showed Poloff a large photograph of her graduating class: Although several of the boys now attend university, some in Ashgabat and others in Russia, none of the girls in the class have been able to leave Serahs to study. She pointed to the boy who graduated first in the class and said that he had committed suicide not long after the school year ended. No one is really sure why, she said.

14. (SBU) Bahar has twice applied to attend university in Ashgabat but was not accepted. She explained that since there are many more applicants to universities than there are places, these days, most young people in Turkmenistan have little hope of continuing their education. She now spends

her days at home sewing traditional Turkmen dresses for sale, but dreams of being an international journalist, "like Christiane Amanpour." She told Poloff, "The world is such an interesting place. I don't want to be stuck in Serahs."

MILES